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Developments in Indochina

State Dept. review completed

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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA*(Information as of 1500)*Page

SOUTH VIETNAM

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Communist forces may have a new foothold south of the Thach Han River. There is no confirmation that Khe Sanh airfield is being used. Some Lower House deputies, representing An Quang and former associates of Big Minh, have denounced President Thieu's political tactics. The new Catholic Freedom Party is withholding support from the government's popular front.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

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Large quantities of supplies continue to move through the Lao panhandle toward South Vietnam. The Communists are constructing a road from the Laos border into the coastal areas of Quang Ngai Province. The North Vietnamese are extending the POL pipeline from the Laos border into the A Shau Valley.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

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The UN secretary general is considering observer status for the Viet Cong.

CAMBODIA

7

Government operations along Routes 2 and 5 are not going too well.

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Sihanouk
backers fear a North Vietnamese take-over of Cambodia.

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Hanoi is apparently apprenensive about security among its minority people on the Laos border.	

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SOUTH VIETNAM

Communist forces in Quang Tri Province may have secured an additional foothold on the south side of the Thach Han River, a strategic waterway west of Quang Tri City which has served as a local front line since the cease-fire. The move was made under cover of a 2,000-round mortar and artillery barrage against South Vietnamese paratroop positions along the river.

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Farther south in Pleiku and Binh Dinh provinces, Communist troops are stiffening their resistance to government clearing efforts.

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No Aircraft at Khe Sanh

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Aerial photography shows that the Communists have built a second runway at Khe Sanh, and both it and the original runway are capable of handling light transport aircraft, such as Hanoi's AN-2s and LI-2s. The Communists have established a radar site near Khe Sanh and have set up three SA-2 missile sites around the airfield. The sites were occupied in late February, but photography indicates the missiles have been removed.

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North Vietnamese transports have been noted flying into airfields in southern North Vietnam in recent weeks,

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[redacted] Since the airfield is in rugged terrain, small transports could have flown into this area without being detected by South Vietnamese radar, but sustained flight activity would almost certainly be spotted. [redacted]

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Opposition Group Attacks Thieu

An opposition bloc in the Lower House has followed up Big Minh's initiative last week with a similar statement calling for a "third force" role. The 29-member assembly group, consisting largely of An Quang Buddhists and associates of Big Minh, asserts that there is a majority bloc that has not followed either side in the war and should play a key role in restoring peace and rebuilding the nation.

The statement denounces President Thieu for attempting to undermine non-Communist ranks to strengthen his own position. Labeling Thieu's political tactics "dictatorial, corrupt, and rotten," the deputies specifically cite attempts to stifle the press and public opinion through presidential decrees on the press and political parties. [redacted]

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Catholics Withholding Support

Leaders of the new Catholic Freedom Party apparently are refusing to participate in the government's popular front. [redacted]

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[redacted] party leaders fully agree with and support the front's anti-Communist objectives, but they fear that President Thieu will use the organization to advance his own power position. The Catholics suspect the front will be a "handmaiden" of Thieu's Democracy Party.

Some of the Catholics apparently are considering ties with Big Minh or other opposition figures. A politically active priest in the Saigon area claims the Freedom Party will join "whatever third force

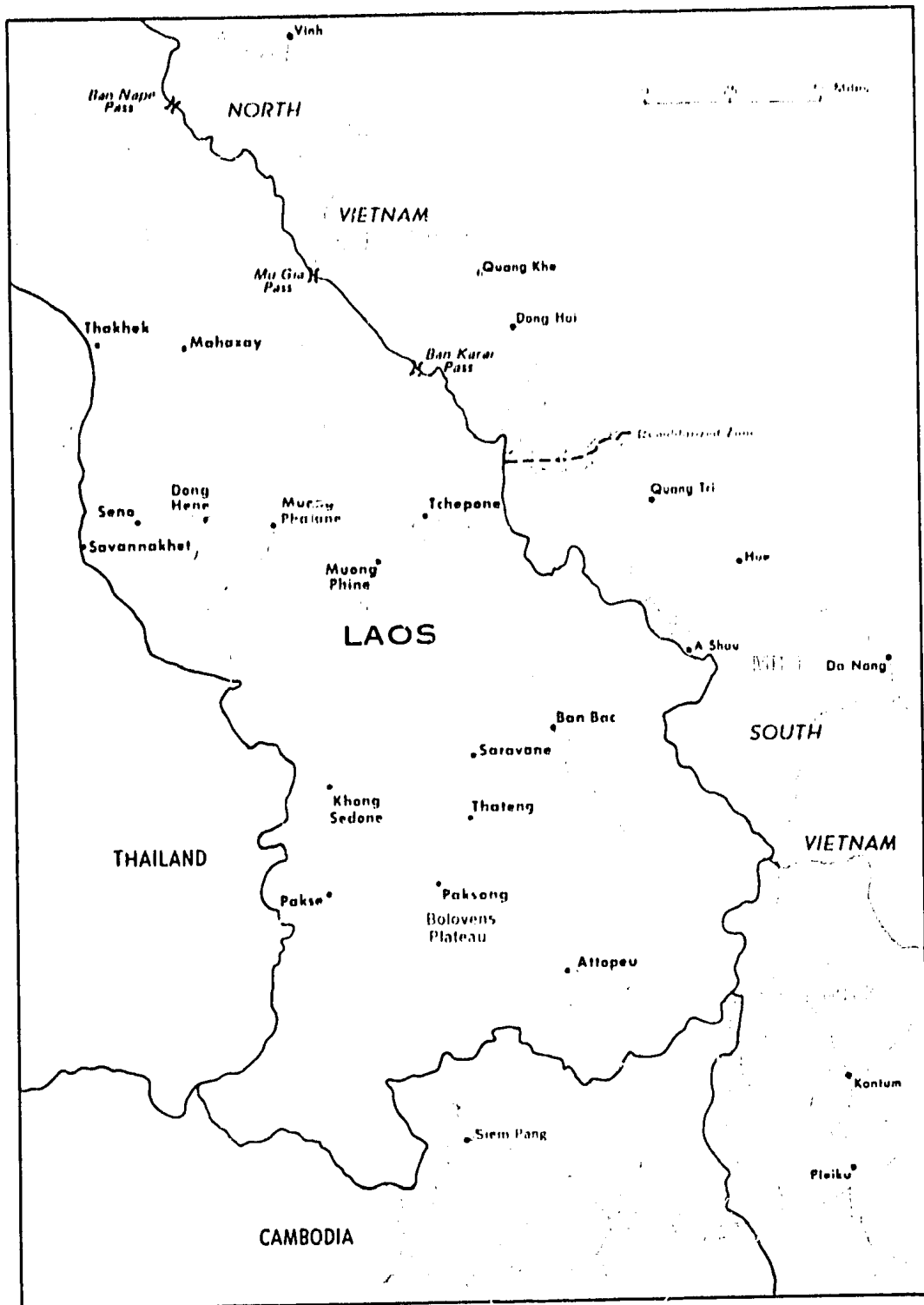
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emerges within the next few weeks." Senator Huyen and the other most influential Catholic leaders, however, are both more cautious and more moderate than any potential "third force" elements. Moreover, they have not closed the door on cooperation with the government, indicating that their decision to remain out of the popular front could later be reversed.

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REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Large quantities of supplies continue to move into and through the Lao panhandle as the North Vietnamese resupply units in all regions of South Vietnam. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]
heavy vehicle movement on the corridors leading into southern Laos. Movement is heaviest through the Ban Karai Pass, where truck traffic appears to be equal to peak levels of past dry seasons. Farther south in the Lao panhandle, there are continuing signs of cargo being dispatched toward central and southern MR-1 in South Vietnam.

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New Communist Road in Northern South Vietnam

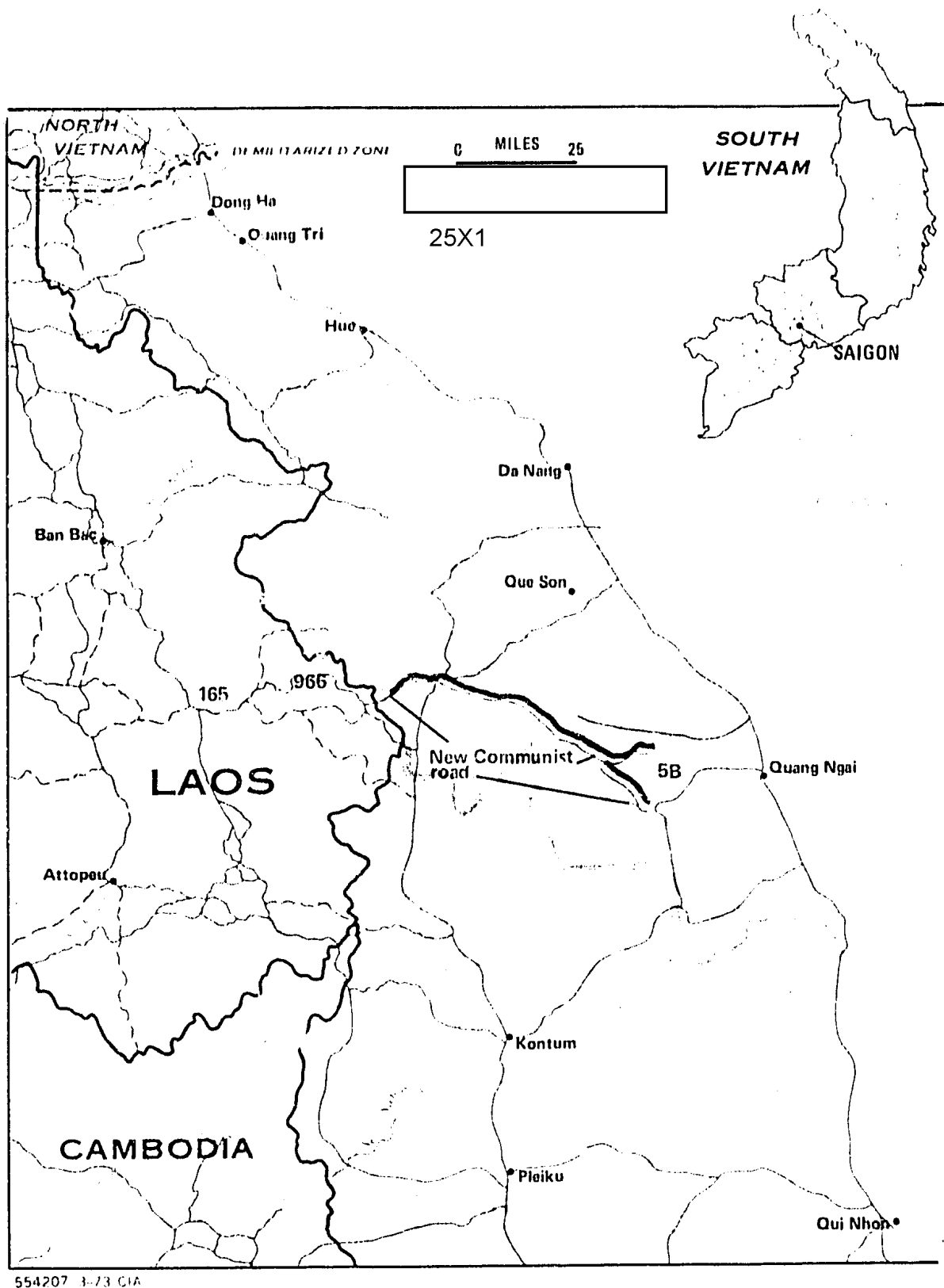
Photography [REDACTED] shows the Communists have been constructing a 70-mile road extending from the Laos border into Quang Ngai Province. When completed, it will give the Communists a motorable route from the Route 966/165 system in southern Laos to the coastal lowlands of both northern and southern Quang Ngai.

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The photography indicates the western half of the road [REDACTED] is complete and probably in use. Construction is still under way on the eastern half of the road which branches northward to within 24 miles of Quang Ngai City. A

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southern branch extends southeast to about 25 miles west of the city. The Communists may plan to link the southern branch with Route 5B running southward along the Quang Ngai - Kontum Province border where the Communists maintain support bases. [REDACTED]

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North Vietnamese POL Pipeline in A Shau Valley

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Aerial photography [REDACTED] shows that the Communists have constructed several miles of petroleum pipeline across the Laos - South Vietnam border into the A Shau Valley. Dense vegetation covers the area between this new line and the north-south pipeline farther west in Laos and it is not yet known whether the two are connected. If the new line is not yet operational, the North Vietnamese probably could complete it in a matter of weeks. The A Shau Valley has long been a major Communist logistics base, and it has been especially active since the cease-fire. The completion of a petroleum pipeline to this area will enable the Communists to pump gasoline and diesel fuel there directly from North Vietnam. [REDACTED]

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INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

UN Secretary General Waldheim is seriously considering making a favorable response to the formal request of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam to establish a liaison office with the UN in New York. Despite earlier US representations, Waldheim told the five permanent Security Council members on Wednesday that he thought such a step would facilitate future discussions of UN humanitarian assistance to Vietnam and provide a way to "contact all parties" in the event it proved necessary to reconvene the Paris peace conference. Waldheim has authority to grant observer status, although that status has in the past been preceded by membership in one or more specialized agencies of the UN as well as recognition by a majority of UN members. While the distinction between observer and liaison status remains unclear, Waldheim could claim that the latter is not dependent on statehood.

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CAMBODIA

The government operation to clear a portion of Route 2 south of Phnom Penh has been delayed by changes in command responsibilities. Farther south on Route 2, the insurgents continue to probe and harass government outposts between Takeo and the South Vietnamese border. A section of Route 5 about 35 miles northwest of Phnom Penh was closed temporarily on 6 March by an insurgent attack. Government troops, supported by US air strikes, quickly reopened the highway.

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FUNK Factionalism

nationalist elements within Sihanouk's front group (FUNK) still fear that a Khmer Communist take-over in Cambodia would in turn lead to North Vietnamese domination of the country. The nationalists still hold that only Sihanouk can save Cambodia from Communism, and that the Lon Nol government therefore

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must negotiate with him. [redacted]
a nationalist "front" has been organized within
FUNK to promote this aim. But in view of their
small numbers and their lack of political leverage
within FUNK--which is dominated by the Khmer Com-
munists--the nationalists are not likely to get
very far in trying to restore Sihanouk to power.

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LAOS

Only a few scattered clashes marred the cease-fire on 6 March. No further fighting was reported in the north near Mounng Soui. Lao T-28s flew bombing missions on the Bolovens Plateau and near Thakhek and the Plaine des Jarres.

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NORTH VIETNAM

Hanoi apparently is dissatisfied with the level of support it has among minority nationality groups in the border areas. Implicitly criticizing the border area security forces for remaining aloof from these groups the head of the North Vietnamese Security Force, Major General Pham Kiet, in a speech broadcast by Radio Hanoi, warned his subordinates to "concentrate on educating and assisting our compatriots."

Kiet advised border control cadres to pay major attention to "screening, training, and improving the contingent of minority nationality peoples' core cadres," implicitly conceding that party influence in these areas was not what it could be. The Security Force chief advised his men to be "firm ideologically, strictly organized, and well-disciplined," perhaps reflecting past instances in which the troops' conduct did not endear them to local inhabitants.

Acknowledging a degree of dissent, Kiet admonished the security forces to see that minority groups "heighten their vigilance and be able to detect voices contradicting the party line---to help maintain order and security." This may also reflect Hanoi's apprehension that the Laos ceasefire will lead to greater cross-border contacts between border area minority peoples.

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